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Anti-consumption beliefs among the Swedish general public

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1 Introduction

Consumer critique stretches back almost to the beginning of the consumer society itself, including Veblen's (1899) analysis of consumption for display among the *nouveau riche*, Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), who argued that consumers are trapped and manipulated by the capitalist system, and Galbraith (1958), who claimed, among other things, that producers create artificial desires that do not contribute to the well-being of consumers (Schor 2007). In recent decades, much of the consumer critique has also incorporated an ecological dimension. Jackson (2009) and others have argued that continued growth in global consumption is incompatible with sustainable development and that changes in values and priorities are required to tackle society's long-term challenges.

The term 'anti-consumption' has been used to cover a range of interrelated beliefs and practices. Zavetoski (2002a) defines it broadly as '...a resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment or rejection of, consumption'. Lyer and Muncy provide a useful mapping of different types of anti-consumer based on whether the purpose is societal or personal and whether the object is general (all consumption) or specific (individual brands or products). Anti-consumers could then be divided into four types: global impact consumers (general object/societal purpose), simplifiers (general object/personal purpose), market activists (specific object/societal purpose) and anti-loyal consumers (specific object/personal purpose). The focus in this study is the global impact consumers, or what could be termed anti-consumption for sustainable development.

Research on anti-consumption has also, to a large extent, focused on groups such as voluntary simplifiers that have consciously shifted lifestyle away from mainstream consumption patterns (e.g. Zavetoski 2002b; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Black and Cherrier 2010; Cherrier et al. 2011). The term is also common in the form of 'anti-consumerism' (Little 2004; Gilbert 2008), which can be viewed as an ideology or socio-political movement that engages a limited proportion of the people. However, to what extent are such ideas spread among the general public? Do people really support the view that society focuses too much on private consumption, or is this just an elitist idea found

among a small group of academics or alternative greens? A better understanding of this is required in order to assess whether strategies for ‘downshifting’ or ‘sufficiency’ could provide viable paths for sustainability transitions.

To our knowledge, previous research surveying the prevalence of anti-consumption beliefs among the general public is limited to the United States, where the statement ‘Our country would be better off if we all consumed less’ has been included in several surveys. Agreements with this statement have been surprisingly high, ranging between 70 and 88 per cent in a number of surveys in the state of Oregon and 79 per cent in a national survey. Interestingly, these studies have also shown that, while there is a clear ideological divide regarding the concern about climate change (94% of Democrats vs 27% of Republicans in Oregon), agreement with the statement about consuming less was much more universal, with only slightly more support among Democrats (Markowitz and Bowerman 2012; Bowerman 2014).

In this paper we survey the general agreement with anti-consumption beliefs among a large representative sample of Swedish adults. We also analyse in which socio-demographic and political groups these beliefs are relatively weak and strong, and how they correlate with attitudes to sustainability policies.

2 Survey

A battery of five questions was developed for incorporation into the Swedish national SOM-survey (Society, Opinion, Media). The questions were formulated to capture contemporary beliefs about consumption and anti-consumption. Sustainability researchers at the Department of Energy Environment at Chalmers University developed an original version of the battery, which was then reviewed and edited by researchers at the SOM-institute. The five questions were formulated as statements that the respondents were asked to rate as absolutely right, partly right, partly wrong or absolutely wrong (Table 1).

What is your opinion about the following statements about people's consumption?	
Alternatives: absolutely right, partly right, partly wrong, absolutely wrong	
1.	People spend too much time and focus on consumption.
2.	People are influenced to buy things they don't need (for example, by TV, advertising, blogs).
3.	For environmental reasons, it is important that we reduce our consumption.
4.	For environmental reasons, it is important that people share things they rarely use.
5.	People's consumption is important to keep the economy going (reversed scale).

Table 1: 'Anti-consumption beliefs' battery of questions

The annual national SOM-survey has explored trends in attitudes and habits since 1986. It contains a number of fixed questions but also gathers questions from researchers from different scientific disciplines. The 2014 survey was distributed to a nationally representative sample of 13,600 individuals aged 16–85. The survey was divided into four partial surveys with 3,400 individuals each. The question battery developed for this study was placed in the second of these four partial surveys. Out of 3,400 individuals in this second sample, 184 were considered to be natural non-responders (incapable of responding because of medical or language problems), giving a net sample of 3,216. SOM managed to collect 1,742 responses, giving a net response rate of 54.2 per cent, which is exceptionally high in an international comparison and the result of some very ambitious survey fieldwork (Table 2). The response rate was higher in older age groups than in younger ones, meaning that older people were overrepresented in the sample.

12 Sept. 2014	Notification postcard to inform about inclusion in sample
19 Sept.	Paper questionnaire with information, answer envelope and pen
29 Sept.	Postcard with thank you or reminder
6 Oct.	New paper questionnaire with information about a web version of the survey
16 Oct.–16 Nov.	Telephone reminders (send out of extra questionnaire if missing)
28 Oct.	Postal reminder to people without known telephone number
18 Nov.	Postal reminder to people who answered over the phone that they would participate
19–20 Nov.	SMS-reminder with link to the web version of the survey
28 Nov.–8 Dec.	Telephone reminders
22 Dec.	Questionnaire to those who answered over the phone that they would participate
7–19 Jan. 2015	Questionnaire also including a questionnaire for explaining non-responses

Table 2: SOM survey fieldwork 2014–2015. Source: Vernersdotter, 2015.

The main benefit of including the question battery in the SOM-survey is that it provides the best possible coverage of the population. The main drawback is the limited space available. Hence, analysis of how anti-consumption beliefs relate to other variables had to be constrained to a number of socio-demographic and political variables available in the same partial survey.

3 Results

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the raw responses to the question battery described in Section 2. We can see a very high level of agreement with all of the consumption critical statements (the four statements to the left), but the majority of respondents also agreed with the statement that people’s consumption is important to keep the economy going.

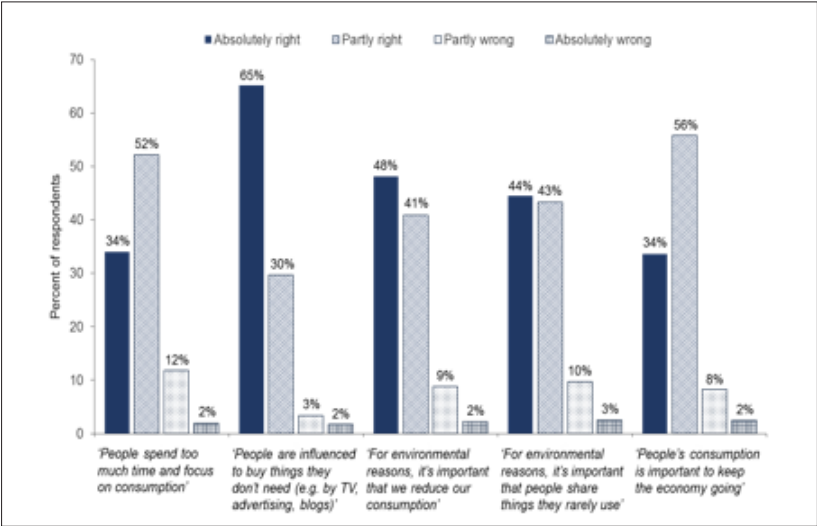


Figure 1: Distribution of responses to the five statements. The number of respondents, from left to right, were: 1674, 1691, 1684, 1666 and 1686. Source: Own illustration.

These results will be explored further in the following sections with the establishment of an anti-consumption scale (3.1), comparisons of anti-consumption beliefs in different socio-demographic and political groups (3.2), multivariate analyses of the same variables (3.3), and, finally, analyses of how this construct correlates with some more specific sustainability-related attitudes.

3.1 Anti-consumption scale

For further analyses of anti-consumption beliefs, a scale was constructed by summing the responses from the statements in Table 1 (see results in Figure 2). For the consumption-critical statements 1–4, responses were translated so that absolutely wrong is a 0, partly wrong is a 1, partly right is a 2 and absolutely right is a 3. Statement 5 has a reversed direction and was hence translated so that absolutely wrong is a 3, partly wrong is a 2, partly right is a 1 and absolutely right is a 0. The sum of these statements were then normalised to a scale from 0 to 10, where 10 indicates the strongest anti-consumption belief, that is, absolute agreement with statements 1–4 and absolute disagreement with statement 5. The tests indicate acceptable internal consistency of the scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72$).

Figure 2 shows a histogram of the anti-consumption scale. The mean in the full sample ($N = 1638$) was 6.82, with a distribution slightly skewed to the right. The anti-consumption scale is used as the dependent variable in the following sub-sections.

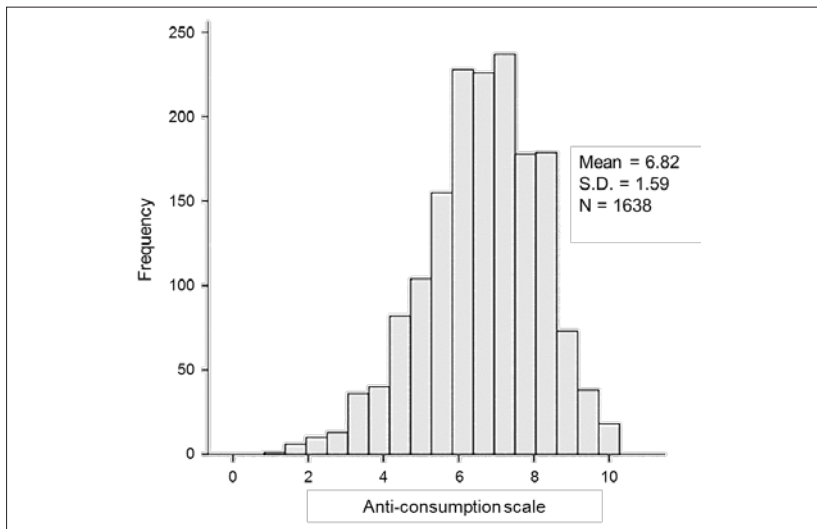


Figure 2: Histogram of the constructed anti-consumption scale. In total, 1,638 respondents answered all five questions. Source: Own illustration.

3.2 Comparison of groups

Table 3 provides group comparisons of anti-consumption beliefs for the factors gender, generations, rural–urban, disposable income, education level, education subject and political orientation. Since the analysis of some factors did not pass Levene’s test of homogeneity of variances (generation, education level and left–right scale), all ANOVAs were performed using the Welch’s test and the Games-Howell post hoc test, which do not assume equal variances.

	N	Mean	S.D.	Equality of means tests
All	1,638	6.82	1.59	
Gender				
Women	858	7.03	1.56	t(1,632) = 5.67, p = .000
Men	776	6.58	1.59	
Generation				
1930–1939	147	6.60	1.40	Welch's F(6, 76.7) = 2.32, p = .034
1940–1949	354	6.81	1.48	
1950–1959	295	6.92	1.59	
1960–1969	278	6.68	1.73	
1970–1979	227	6.78	1.74	
1980–1989	198	7.15	1.54	
1990–1999	134	6.71	1.56	
Rural–urban				
Rural	233	6.85	1.69	Welch's F(4, 630.7) = 4.08, p = .003
Small town	409	6.65	1.50	
Mid-size city	519	6.84	1.55	
Big city suburb	285	6.80	1.68	
Big city centre	169	7.21	1.55	
Disposable income				
Quartile group 1 (low income)	352	6.79	1.59	Welch's F(3, 812.9) = 4.22, p = .006

	N	Mean	S.D.	Equality of means tests
Quartile group 2	381	6.99	1.55	
Quartile group 3	363	6.88	1.64	
Quartile group 4 (high income)	375	6.60	1.58	
Education level				
Primary school	286	6.56	1.49	Welch's F(3, 840.5) = 8.30, p = .000
Secondary school	474	6.71	1.49	
Post-secondary school	403	6.83	1.61	
University degree	454	7.11	1.69	
Education subject				
Technology	331	6.39	1.59	Welch's F(6, 362.3) = 12.26, p = .000
Economics, business and law	344	6.67	1.57	
Health care and social work	271	7.02	1.55	
Natural science	132	7.15	1.57	
Teaching and media	155	7.26	1.45	
Humanities	44	7.77	1.34	
Other	147	6.88	1.46	
Political orientation				
Clearly to the left	210	7.60	1.55	Welch's F(4, 658.9) = 42.72, p = .000
Somewhat to the left	405	7.26	1.37	
Neither left nor right	421	6.78	1.47	
Somewhat to the right	395	6.47	1.54	
Clearly to the right	189	5.88	1.71	

Table 3: Comparison of the anti-consumption beliefs (scale 0–10) in groups divided by socio-demographic and political variables. Equality of means was tested using the t-test for gender and one-way ANOVA with the Welch's F-test for variables with more than two groups.

Gender: The mean value of anti-consumption beliefs was significantly higher for women ($M = 7.03$) than for men ($M = 6.58$) ($p = .000$).

Generations: the analysis reveals no clear trends from generation to generation. Pairwise Games-Howell post hoc tests showed statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) between respondents born in the 1980s ($M = 7.15$) and those born in the 1930s ($M = 6.60$) and 1960s ($M = 6.68$).

Rural–urban: the analysis reveals no clear trends along the rural–urban dimension, but people in big city centres were found to have stronger anti-consumption beliefs than the other groups. Pairwise Games-Howell post hoc tests showed statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) between respondents in big city centres ($M = 7.21$) and those in small towns ($M = 6.65$) and mid-size cities ($M = 6.84$).

Disposable income: the analysis reveals no strong pattern with respect to income level. Pairwise Games-Howell post hoc tests showed statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) between respondents in the second quartile group, namely, medium–low income ($M = 6.99$), and those in the fourth quartile group, namely, high income ($M = 6.60$).

Education level: the analysis shows that people with higher education levels have stronger anti-consumption beliefs than people with lower education levels. The Pairwise Games-Howell post hoc tests showed statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) between respondents with a university degree ($M = 7.11$) and those with primary school education ($M = 6.56$) and secondary school education ($M = 6.71$).

Education subject: the analysis shows that people's education subject has a strong relationship with anti-consumption beliefs. In particular, people with more material education subjects such as 'technology' and 'economics, business, law' were less likely to have strong anti-consumption beliefs. Games-Howell post hoc tests showed statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) between respondents with an education in 'technology' ($M = 6.39$) and all other subjects, except for 'economics, business, law'. Statistically significant differences were also found between 'economics, business, law' ($M = 6.67$) and 'natural science' ($M = 7.15$), 'teaching and media' ($M = 7.26$)

and ‘humanities’ ($M = 7.77$). Finally, significant differences were also found between people with an education in ‘humanities’ and those with educations in ‘health care and social work’ ($M = 7.02$).

Political orientation: the analysis shows that people’s political orientation along the left–right scale has a strong relationship with anti-consumption beliefs with the highest values in the left end ($M = 7.60$) and the lowest in the right end ($M = 5.88$). Games-Howell post hoc tests indicated strong statistical significance for all pairwise comparisons, except between ‘clearly’ and ‘some-what’ to the left ($p = .058$).

3.3 Multivariate analysis

Table 4 shows the results of a multivariate regression analysis of determinants for the anti-consumption belief scale. The independent variables are similar to the variables analysed in the ANOVAs (Table 3) but, in order to make use of all the variance in the variables, disposable income was treated as a continuous variable, the generation groups were replaced with the continuous variable age, and the education level variable includes all eight groups available in the SOM survey. The results in Table 4 show that political orientation along the left–right scale is the most important of the analysed variables in terms of explaining anti-consumption beliefs. Other important variables are education level and gender. While the ANOVA indicated a weak but significant relationship between disposable income and anti-consumption beliefs, this was not found in the multivariate analysis, as education level was also included in the model.

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients
		B	Std. Error	Beta
Left-right scale	1–5	–.413***	.032	–.320
Education	1–8	.115***	.023	.137
Gender	0 woman; 1 man	–.360***	.078	–.116
Rural-urban scale	1–5	.072*	.034	.054
Disposable income	kSEK/c.u./yr	.000	.000	–.033
Age	yr	.003	.002	.031
N		1441		
R ²		0.15		
Max VIF		1.27		

Significance levels: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 4: Multivariate regression analysis of determinants of anti-consumption beliefs

3.4 Correlation with green attitudes

Although the available data did not include variables for a green political orientation, it was possible to estimate the anti-consumption beliefs for voters of different parties. People voting for the green party, which has the environment as its main political issue, had the strongest anti-consumption beliefs ($M = 7.99$), which is higher than would be expected by its position along the left–right scale.

Anti-consumption beliefs were also found to be correlated with the following:

- Supporting a new climate tax on meat: $r = .37$ ($p = .000$)
- Supporting a new climate tax on air travel: $r = .35$ ($p = .000$)
- Supporting the proposal for six-hour workdays: $r = .25$ ($p = .000$)

4 Discussion

The results of this study have shown that anti-consumption beliefs are widespread among the Swedish general public. For example, the statement ‘People spend too much time and focus on consumption’ was valued as absolutely right by 34 per cent and partly right by 52 per cent, while only 12 per cent valued it as partly wrong and 2 per cent as absolutely wrong. Anti-consumption beliefs were found to be correlated with a political orientation towards the ‘left’ and being ‘green’, being a woman and having a higher education, particularly in the humanities. There were, however, no clear relationships with income level. The people with the strongest anti-consumption beliefs could, to some extent, be described as high cultural capital consumers (Carfagna et al. 2014), but it is noteworthy that no groups were identified that had very strong antipathies towards the surveyed anti-consumption statements.

It may be questioned to what extent these results are generalisable within an international context. Previous research has, for example, also shown a relatively low degree of materialistic values among Swedes (Andersson and Nässén 2016), but, on the other hand, cross-country comparisons of environmental concern in the World Values Survey show that Swedes are somewhere in the middle (Jorgenson and Givens 2014). As mentioned in the introduction, results from the US also show a rather widespread agreement with the statement ‘Our country would be better off if we all consumed less’ (Markowitz and Bowerman 2012; Bowerman, 2014). Hence, it would not be unreasonable to assume that these findings could also be representative of similar Western countries.

These findings should not be overplayed in terms of expectations for more sustainable consumption patterns. The so-called value–action gap is well known from previous research, which has, for example, shown that environmental concern correlates poorly with people’s actual emissions from consumption (Vringer et al. 2007; Tabi 2013; Nässén et al. 2015). Moreover, as shown by Ozanne and Ballantine (2010), who studied the motivations for engaging in sharing activities, not all of those who may be classified as having anti-consumption behaviours hold anti-consumption beliefs. In the long term, how-

ever, what people view as attractive lifestyles may be important in relation to options and opportunities for transitions towards more sustainable societies. If people sense there is something wrong or unsatisfactory with contemporary consumer lifestyles, then that may also open up sustainability pathways that include strategies and policy-making that go beyond eco-efficiency and also include downshifting alternatives. Previous research has also shown that improvements in work–life balance may offer significant potential for reducing greenhouse gas emissions (Nässén et al. 2009; Knight et al. 2013; Nässén and Larsson 2015), and that downshifting consumption volumes may also be combined with high levels of subjective well-being (Holmberg et al. 2012; Andersson et al. 2014).

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